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ABSTRACT

AEL works with state educational entities to help schools become higher-performing learning communities. AEL's current partnership with Lincoln County (West Virginia) began about 6 months after the state board of education assumed administrative control of the county school system, citing major deficiencies in the system. AEL provided facilitative support for developing the community strategic plan that was required to regain local control. Six strategic planning meetings held at the county's four high schools were attended by 30-50 people from each community. The process was assessed via questionnaires and phone surveys of 79 people. Findings indicate that the process attracted many people besides direct employees of the school system. However, local political power brokers, poorer residents, and students were poorly represented. Most participants reported satisfaction with the process, but a sizeable minority felt it took longer than necessary. Many participants viewed citizen apathy as a major barrier to reform efforts. Local politics, including cronyism and a state senator promoting consolidation, was a major concern to residents eager for improvements. Residents also distrusted state-level institutions, a distrust solidly based in the history of the relationship between county residents and the state board of education. Geographic isolation of culturally different communities and consolidation efforts contributed to resentment and distrust in the county. While consolidation was viewed as a negative outcome of the state takeover, there was hope that an improved educational system would result. (TD)

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Report on the Strategic Planning Process in Lincoln County, West Virginia

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Report on the Strategic Planning Process in Lincoln County, West Virginia

By

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September 2002

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AEL is a catalyst for schools and communities to build lifelong learning systems that harness resources, research, and practical wisdom. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. For these same four states, it operates the Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education. In addition, it serves as the Region IV Comprehensive Center and operates the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. AEL houses the Institute for the Advancement of Emerging Technologies in Education (IAETE) and the Institute for the Advancement of Research in Education (IARE). The REL contract includes a technology specialty for the nation's system of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories.

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Executive Summary

AEL works with and through state and district educational entities to develop the capacity of schools to select, implement, and sustain reforms that will enable them to become higher-performing learning communities (AEL, 2001). One approach AEL has taken in pursuing this goal has been to work with intensive sites, or partner communities—districts that have an acute need for a variety of services to help them become high performing learning communities.

Lincoln County

Lincoln County, West Virginia, is one of AEL's partner communities. Lincoln County is located in rural southwestern West Virginia, in the northwestern tip of what is known as the coalfields, a previously booming coalmining region now plagued by long-standing political issues, unemployment, severe poverty, and geographic isolation. Although there have never been many mines operating in Lincoln County, many residents were miners who commuted to neighboring counties. Only recently did the opening of Corridor G, a four-lane state route, establish a high-speed highway that connected Lincoln County with Charleston and Logan, and easy access to jobs. Established in 1867 from parts of four surrounding counties, Lincoln County and its residents continue to retain some of the character of and allegiances to its former configurations with four very distinct communities (Lincoln County GenWeb, 2001). The population of 22,108 is overwhelmingly White (99%). The Lincoln County school district, the largest employer in the county, operates four high schools, seven elementary schools, and one vocational center.

Education in Lincoln County has a rich history that colors the current context. In the mid-1970s, a group of parents from Lincoln County sued the West Virginia State Board of Education on the grounds that the distribution of tax monies toward education favored wealthier counties over poorer ones (West Virginia Archives and History, 1998). The 1975 court case (*Janet Pauley v. West Virginia State Board of Education*), settled in 1982 by what is known as the Recht decision, mandated that West Virginia forge a path toward equitable school funding. However, in 1995, a group of Lincoln County parents had the case reopened, arguing that the revamped funding system was still "constitutionally deficient" (Catalanello, 1999). In 1997 Judge Robinson agreed that, despite considerable progress, West Virginia's finance system still violated the state constitution (Keller, 1999).

The county has also been grappling with the issue of school consolidation for the past decade. In 1991, Lincoln County residents defeated a levy proposal to consolidate the county's four high schools into one. In an ironic twist, the School Building Authority, which was created after the Recht Decision to help ensure equitable treatment of school facilities, responded by not giving monies to the school system to upgrade and maintain buildings. Various plans were developed throughout the 1990s to address the consolidation issue, with each being defeated by the county school board, usually after hearing strong vocal opposition from residents (Richard, 2002).

In addition to poverty, lawsuits, and forced consolidation, the residents and the school system in Lincoln County are now coping with a state takeover, thus joining 48 other school districts across the country to fall under state control (Sharpe, 2002). The West Virginia State Board of Education assumed administrative control of the Lincoln County school system in June 2000,

following a state report on the county's failure to make adequate progress in rectifying major deficiencies in the school system identified in an October 1999 audit.

AEL's Strategic Planning Process

AEL's current partnership with Lincoln County began when two of AEL's School Capacity Development (SCD) team members met with the state-appointed district superintendent on January 5, 2001. The parties discussed the school system's needs and ways AEL might assist the district in meeting such needs. Over the course of a series of meetings during the spring of 2001, the assistance to be provided by AEL was outlined. AEL agreed to provide facilitative support for the community strategic planning process, which is mandated of all school systems. One condition that the Lincoln County school system had to meet to regain local control was the development, with community input, of a strategic plan for the school system that includes a mission statement and measurable goals to support the mission.

AEL determined the need for an orientation to the strategic planning process to help citizens make an informed decision about their participation. In late fall of 2001, letters of invitation to four introductory community meetings were mailed to a list of potential participants, including business leaders, parents, key community members, and others who affect or are affected by Lincoln County schools (be they residents of the county or not). The introductory meetings were held at all four high schools in late January and early February 2002. Attendees were informed that the strategic planning meetings, open to all community members, would be held to develop a vision for Lincoln County accomplishments in the next 10 years; identify the role of the school system in developing the vision; and create a mission statement for the school system along with measurable goals, objectives, and aligned activities supporting the vision.

At the introductory meetings, AEL staff members made it clear that the strategic planning meetings were about Lincoln County as one community and how an improved school system could support the vision of what residents wanted the county to become; the process was not about four separate communities, the proposed regional airport, school consolidation, or other local politics. Despite the announcement about the meetings *not* being about consolidation or the airport, both issues were raised by attendees at each of the introductory meetings, and AEL staff worked to direct conversations back to the main purposes of the strategic planning process. Attendance at the meetings ranged from less than 30 to more than 50 people from all four communities, with approximately half at each meeting being school system personnel and the other half representing a broad range of community sectors. A common concern among people attending the introductory meetings was the extent to which the state board of education was giving genuine power to the group to create a strategic plan that would be implemented.

The strategic planning meetings began on February 12, 2002. At the first meeting, the 62 attendees engaged in a visioning exercise that resulted in the following visioning areas: greatest accomplishments, economic development, infrastructure, lifelong learning, early childhood, quality of life, senior services, health care, and recreation. The second strategic planning session on February 19 reviewed current data on Lincoln County and mapped the assets and challenges facing Lincoln County relating to each visioning area. The purpose of the third strategic planning meeting, held on March 12, was to formulate the school system's potential contribution to the visioning areas. The questions for the group of 41 attendees became (a) What is the Lincoln County schools system doing now to contribute to the vision? Volunteers were recruited to meet as a small work group to draft a mission statement. At the fourth strategic planning

meeting on March 19, which was attended by 38 people, the whole group reviewed the mission statement drafted by the small group. The task for the evening was to gain consensus from the group on the mission statement and begin to identify goal categories. Small groups of volunteers met in late March and April before the fifth large group meeting to work on the wording of goals, objectives and activities. On May 7, the draft strategic plan was reviewed by the 24 attendees, and several minor revisions were made based on input from the group. The group suggested the creation of an oversight committee consisting of community members, parents, and school staff to ensure that the strategic plan would be implemented by the school system.

At the March 19 meeting, a questionnaire measuring group climate, task focus, collective efficacy, and perceptions of the process and challenges was administered to the 33 individuals who remained until the end of the meeting. Respondents also provided their main reasons for participating, with most of them stating a concern for the quality of education in the county. Respondents considered the climate and task focus to be positive, though responses to items measuring collective efficacy—or their perceptions on the group's ability to accomplish its goals—were less strongly positive. These respondents believed that citizen apathy, gaining consensus from residents of differing communities, and local politics were great challenges faced by Lincoln County.

Interviews with Residents

After the strategic planning meetings ended, phone interviews were conducted with a random stratified sample of 46 people, stratified by level of attendance and whether a school system employee or community member. The interview included questions about participation, the process, and perceived quality of relationships between residents and the school system. People who had attended only an introductory meeting explained their decisions not to participate in terms of lack of time or competing commitments, and the process's lack of relevance to their concerns. Those who had attended the strategic planning meetings generally thought highly of the process, though a few believed that the process required more time of participants than it should have.

More than half of the respondents said they believed, or were hopeful, that the school system would refer to the strategic plan when setting policy and programming. Ten of the 46 interviewees, however, said they did not believe that the decision makers would refer to the strategic plan. Twenty-four of those interviewed said that the plan would make a difference in the quality of education in the county, though 14 of those interviewed disagreed. Most of the people who attended the strategic planning meetings reported that they had at least some influence over what occurred in Lincoln County schools, many because they were school system employees and others because they believed the process had given them "voice."

The majority of respondents (39 of 46) said that the county was not unified. The causes attributed to the lack of unification were varied. Many (15) mentioned geography as a major underlying cause of fragmentation; the mountains, poor roads, and long travel times made it difficult for people in the four communities to feel united with one another. A respondent explained, "Right now, it is a divided community because of the way we are situated, so isolated from one another. It's 35 miles from the northern to the southern part. We have a lot going on in between. The mountains ... the geography separates us. I hope we'll have highways someday." Each community tends to associate itself not with other communities within the county, but with geographically closer communities in the adjacent counties (e.g., the Duval area

associates more closely with Charleston). Consolidation is another divisive factor that has created rivalries beyond those arising out of high school sporting events. All these issues have contributed to an "us versus them" mentality in the communities. Slightly more than half of the people who were asked the question reported that relationships were changing among people from the four Lincoln County communities, at least among those residents who had participated in the strategic planning process.

One question queried residents on their perceptions of the relationships between the school system and the community. Residents had mixed opinions regarding the relationship between Lincoln County residents and the state educational entities (State Board of Education and the West Virginia Department of Education), though reactions to the question were mainly negative. The perceived relationship between the county school board and the community was also negative, though less so compared to the relationship with state entities, with respondents commenting on the board's current powerlessness. There was also a perceived lack of trust from approximately half of the respondents toward central office staff (e.g., the superintendent); the other half characterized the relationship in more positive terms, perceiving the community to be hopeful that the central office could effect change. Relationships with local schools were perceived as more positive. Almost half of the respondents had noted changes beginning to occur in relationships between central office and residents as a result of the strategic planning process, with those respondents who took part in the process witnessing a more positive relationship between residents and central office staff than reported by those who did not participate in the process.

AEL can learn several things from this community involvement effort.

- The process attracted many people who were not direct employees of the school system, nor residents of the county. Community leaders, businesspeople, people in social services and health care, and other community sectors participated, along with representatives of the school system.
- Poorly represented in the strategic planning process, however, were many of the political power brokers of the county, as well as poorer residents and students. These groups can be characterized, then, as hard-to-reach populations.
- AEL did not take an active role in recruiting residents to participate in the strategic planning process. Other models would have been possible. One suggestion for AEL staff is, when working with community groups, to acknowledge other community engagement models and note the reasons for choosing a model emphasizing neutrality.
- The process as it was implemented was satisfactory to most of the participants. Some people felt confused by the inclusion of health care and economic development in a strategic planning process for education; they stopped attending the strategic planning sessions, not understanding that the mission was for Lincoln County and the strategic plan was to be about how the school system could support that mission.
- A sizeable minority believed the process took more time than was needed. While this attempt in Lincoln County can be considered a success, AEL staff should consider continuing to refine its process to better balance between a respect for people's time and allowing for everyone's input.

- Many participants reported being motivated by a deep-seated desire to create a better educational system in the county. These individuals would be counted in any measure of the community's assets as valuable resources.
- The people who participated viewed citizen apathy as a major barrier confronting any reform efforts in the county. However, these participants may have been more "involved" than the average citizen. Therefore, this perspective is not necessarily an accurate reflection of citizen engagement or apathy in the county.
- Politics was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier to improving Lincoln County schools. Politics internal to Lincoln County, including perceived cronyism and a state senator promoting consolidation, appeared to be a major concern to residents eager to see improvements. These residents, however, also distrusted state-level institutions, a distrust solidly based in the history of the relationship between county residents and the state board of education. Distrust and wariness of those in power—no matter who or what entity—peppered comments about relationships in the county and belief in the strategic planning process.
- A perceived lack of genuineness on the part of the school system to seek "real" input from residents was the reason given by some people who did not attend the strategic planning meetings. Only half of those interviewed thought the strategic plan would make a difference in education in the county, and most interviewees who thought they had influence over what occurred in the school system were, in fact, school system employees.
- The geographic isolation of culturally different communities combined with forced consolidation to fan the flames of resentment and distrust in the county. These barriers were not considered insurmountable, at least not by those who attended the planning meetings.
- It is too soon to tell whether the resentment residents expressed about the consolidation issue will lessen, or how, in the long term, the consolidation issue will affect school-community relations. While consolidation is viewed as a negative outcome of the state takeover, there are those who are hopeful that a positive outcome of the state takeover will be an improved educational system, one that is worthy of the county's children.

Introduction

AEL works with and through state and district educational entities to develop the capacity of low-performing schools to select, implement, and sustain reforms that will enable them to become higher-performing learning communities (AEL, 2001). One approach AEL has taken in pursuing this goal has been to work with intensive sites, or partner communities—districts that have an acute need for a variety of services to help them become high performing learning communities. Lincoln County, West Virginia, is one of AEL's partner communities.

Setting the Stage: A Brief History of Lincoln County

To understand the methods and outcomes of the strategic planning process used in Lincoln County, one must understand the context in which this intervention occurred. Lincoln County is located in rural southwestern West Virginia, in the northwestern tip of what is known as the coalfields, a previously booming coalmining region now plagued by long-standing political issues, unemployment, severe poverty, and geographic isolation. Although there have never been many mines operating in the county, many residents were miners who commuted to neighboring counties. Only recently did the opening of Corridor G, the four-lane state route 119, establish a high-speed highway that connected Lincoln County with Charleston and Logan, and easier access to jobs. The county itself encompasses 437 square miles. Established in 1867 from parts of four surrounding counties, Lincoln County and its residents retain some of the character of and allegiances to these former configurations with four very distinct communities (Lincoln County GenWeb, 2001). These attitudes are paralleled by the infrastructure—no roads cross the county; instead, several routes circle the area (See map in Appendix A).

Like neighboring counties to its south and east, Lincoln County struggles with poverty, with a quarter of the population (24.9%) and a third of children (33.7%) living below the federal poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). The median household income, according to the most recent census, is $22,744, as compared to a state median of $27,432 and a national median of $37,005. The population of 22,108 is overwhelmingly White (99%). The Lincoln County school district, the largest employer in the county, operates four high schools, seven elementary schools, and one vocational center. Student enrollment during the 2000-2001 school year was reported as 3,900 (West Virginia Department of Education, 2001).

Education in Lincoln County has a rich history that colors the current context. In the mid-1970s, a group of parents from Lincoln County sued the West Virginia State Board of Education on the grounds that the distribution of tax monies toward education favored wealthier counties over poorer ones (West Virginia Archives and History, 1998). The 1975 court case (*Janet Pauley v. West Virginia State Board of Education*), settled in 1982 by what is known as the Recht decision, mandated that West Virginia forge a path toward equitable school funding. However, in 1995, a group of Lincoln County parents had the case reopened, arguing that the revamped funding system was still "constitutionally deficient" (Catalanello, 1999). In 1997 Judge Robinson agreed that, despite considerable progress, West Virginia's finance system still violated the state constitution (Keller, 1999). In the 2002 *Education Week* Quality Counts report, West Virginia received a funding equity grade of C+ (Fine, 2002), in contrast to its 1999 B+ as "one of the nation's most equitable funding systems" (Keller, 1999, p. 183).

The county has been grappling with the issue of school consolidation for the past decade. In 1991, Lincoln County residents defeated a levy proposal to consolidate the county's four high

schools into one. In an ironic twist, the School Building Authority, which was created after the Recht decision to help ensure equitable treatment of school facilities, responded by not giving monies to the school system to upgrade and maintain buildings. Various plans were developed throughout the 1990s to address the consolidation issue, with each being defeated by the county school board, usually after strong vocal opposition from residents. Politicians also have taken strong stands on the consolidation issue. Lloyd Jackson, a powerful state senator from the county during the 1990s, was head of the state senate's education committee. A strong supporter of school consolidation throughout West Virginia, Jackson supported the single high school plan for West Hamlin in Lincoln County (Richard, 2002).

In addition to poverty, lawsuits, and forced consolidation, the residents and the school system in Lincoln County are now coping with a state takeover, joining 48 other school districts across the country to fall under state control (Sharpe, 2002). The West Virginia State Board of Education assumed administrative control of the county school system in June 2000, following a state report on the county's failure to make adequate progress in rectifying major deficiencies identified in an October 1999 audit. The board declared a state of emergency in Lincoln County Schools in the fall of 1999 "when a report by the Office of Education Performance Audits revealed that the county had over 200 deficiencies in areas ranging from hiring practices, teacher certification, curriculum and instruction, and cleanliness of facilities" (West Virginia Department of Education, 2000).

AEL's current partnership with Lincoln County began when two School Capacity Development (SCD) team members met with the state-appointed district superintendent on January 5, 2001. The parties discussed the school system's needs and ways AEL might assist the district in meeting such needs. Over the course of a series of meetings during the spring of 2001, the assistance to be provided by AEL was outlined. AEL agreed to provide facilitative support for a community strategic planning process mandated of all school systems. One condition that the Lincoln County school system must meet to regain local control is to develop, with community input, a strategic plan for the school system that includes a mission statement and measurable goals to support the mission.

AEL's Strategic Planning Process

AEL determined the need for an orientation to the strategic planning process to help citizens make an informed decision about their participation. To reach people in all four communities, not just in Hamlin where the school board office is located, introductory meetings were needed in each community. The meetings would be held at each high school with the understanding that if people committed to the process, they had to do so as Lincoln Countians rather than as residents of a single high school community.

In late fall of 2001, letters of invitation to four introductory community meetings were mailed to a list of potential participants that included business leaders, parents, key community members, and others who might affect or be affected by Lincoln County schools (be they residents of the county or not). School principals and central office staff identified individuals who were active in the community and who might have an interest in participating in the process. In addition, announcements were made at local organizational meetings and were published in school and community newsletters. Because many residents work outside the county and must drive a distance from work to home, food was provided at all meetings. The introductory meetings were held at all four high schools in late January and early February 2002. Attendees

were informed that the strategic planning meetings, open to all community members, would be held to develop a vision for Lincoln County accomplishments in the next 10 years; identify the role of the school system in developing the vision; and create a mission statement for the school system along with measurable goals, objectives and aligned activities supporting the vision.

Purpose of This Report

This evaluation report has two main purposes. First, it describes the strategic planning meetings as observed by the evaluator and reports attendees' impressions of the process. As such, it is documentation of this phase of AEL's work with this intensive site. Second, it presents perceptions of a number of Lincoln County residents of the current state of relationships between residents and the school system in this traditionally fragmented county. Thus, it provides AEL staff with rich contextual information about the county for future intervention with the school system.

Audience for This Report

The report is intended for AEL personnel who will be working with Lincoln County over the next several years, as well as staff who may implement similar efforts in other counties. It serves as written feedback to the staff members who facilitated the strategic planning process. In addition, it provides insight from the perspective of community residents on the dynamics of relationships between county residents and their school system. This serves to anchor current and future work AEL performs within a richly drawn context. Because the work in Lincoln County is supported by funds from the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), results will also be shared with USDE officials.

Purposes and Activities of Each Strategic Planning Meeting

Introductory meetings were held at all four high schools between January 24 and February 7, 2002, to help participants from the four subcommunities in Lincoln County make informed decisions about their potential involvement in the strategic planning process. At these meetings, AEL staff members facilitated discussions among participants on the following topics:

- purpose of the Lincoln County strategic planning process
- why AEL was involved
- who was present (what community sectors were represented by attendees)
- expectations
- process and product of strategic planning
- what the process was and was not about
- ground rules for future meetings
- next steps

A common concern among people attending these introductory meetings was the extent to which the state board of education was giving genuine power to a strategic planning group to create a strategic plan that would be implemented. Individuals at three of the meetings made comments about how their specific Lincoln County community would be "easier" for AEL to work with, or that working with other communities would be more difficult. AEL staff members made it clear that the strategic planning meetings were about Lincoln County as one community and about how an improved school system could support the vision of what residents wanted the county to become; the process was not about four separate communities, the proposed regional airport, school consolidation, or other local politics. Despite the announcement about the meetings *not* being about consolidation or the airport, both issues were raised by attendees all the introductory meetings, and AEL staff worked to direct conversations back to the main purposes of the strategic planning process. Attendance at the meetings ranged from less than 30 to more than 50 people from all four communities, with approximately half at each meeting being school system personnel and the other half representing a broad range of community sectors. In general, the people who attended each of the four strategic planning introductory meetings were polite, listened as AEL staff explained the process, asked questions, and offered suggestions.

All of the main strategic planning meetings were held at the central office in Hamlin. At the first strategic planning meeting, held on February 12, attendees engaged in a visioning exercise designed to move them away from thinking about individual community school issues and toward a focus on the broader Lincoln County community. Poster paper was hung on the walls around the room with a "visioning area" on each sheet. Participants were divided into groups, and they walked around the room providing ideas on the poster sheets about what Lincoln County would be like in 10 years in each visioning area. The areas included Lincoln County's greatest accomplishments, economic development, infrastructure, lifelong learning, early childhood, quality of life, senior services, health care, and recreation. After all groups had listed visions for the county in each area, each group worked on a single visioning area to summarize the major points into one to two sentences. The groups' visions for Lincoln County are listed below in their words:

1. Greatest Accomplishments

a. Infrastructure to support *any* business
b. High-quality, birth-to-death educational system for everyone

2. Economic Development
    a. Jobs will not be a problem after "Lincoln International Airport" is built
    b. Construction and spin-off jobs will bring workers to Lincoln County and an increased tax base will support the whole county
3. Infrastructure
    a. Most important is water and sewage for all that will lead to better transportation, communication, and economic growth such as airport, etc.
4. Lifelong Learning
    a. To provide educational and vocational opportunities in high-demand areas of employment—e.g., technology, service industries, recreation, air services—through the development of partnerships with local community colleges, businesses, and the local school system via internships, mentorships, apprenticeships, and other educational opportunities
    b. Lifelong learners are cultivated through participation in and experience of cultural and fine arts activities
5. Early Childhood
    a. Reliable private and public-supported day care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week—through the county
    b. Parenting classes in grades 9 through 12
6. Quality of Life
    a. A friendly, giving people, in caring close-knit communities with recreational facilities that promote good health and fitness and fun in a safe environment for families and youth that has beautiful scenery, that promotes a calming effect, and is supported through cultural and fine arts opportunities
    b. Opportunities for personal growth and education in a safe community
7. Health Care
    a. Expanded access to primary and specialty health care that is comprehensive in nature and emphasizes birth to death in Lincoln County
8. Senior Services
    a. A safe, comfortable environment for all seniors that would include health care, transportation, and recreational activities
9. Recreation
    a. Centrally located indoor/outdoor multipurpose recreational facility that accommodates all ages

Specific individuals then volunteered or were asked to compile data for the next meeting surrounding these vision areas to illustrate the current state of Lincoln County. The two-hour meeting convened and ended on time.

The second strategic planning meeting, held on February 19, 2002, reviewed current data on Lincoln County. Some participants suggested allowing more than one week to collect such data,

or providing a template for organizing the data. The participants were divided into seven groups, each at a separate table. The individual responsible for compiling data on each visioning area gave a short presentation, with AEL staff providing additional data on the county as needed to give a complete data "picture" of that visioning area. Each group reviewed all the data compiled relating to one of the following visioning areas: economic development, infrastructure, lifelong learning, early childhood, health care, senior services, and recreation. Groups mapped the assets and challenges facing Lincoln County relating to each visioning area.

The purpose of the third strategic planning meeting, held on March 12, was to formulate the school system's potential contribution to the visioning areas. The questions for the group became (a) What is the Lincoln County schools system doing now to contribute to the vision? and (b) What could the school system do to contribute further to this vision? Because it had been three weeks since the previous meeting, AEL facilitators began with an ice-breaking activity called "Grouper, Grouper" to energize people and get them talking to one another. After the activity, the work from the seven visioning groups was reviewed. People were given an opportunity to walk around the room reading from the large poster boards on the walls about the programs currently in place at each of the schools. People were then grouped according to the table at which they were sitting. Each group discussed and wrote answers to the two questions listed above as related to each visioning area. Then the participants, with AEL facilitation, created a "mind map" of what the real work of Lincoln County Schools should be. The mind map represented brainstormed ideas that were related through branching, and grouped according to the vision areas. Volunteers were recruited to meet as a small work group to draft a mission statement using information from the mind map before the main meeting the following week.

At the fourth strategic planning meeting, held on March 19, the whole group reviewed the mission statement drafted by the small group. The task for the evening was to gain consensus from the group on the mission statement and to begin to identify goal categories. Two issues were raised about the wording of the mission statement. The first issue involved the sequence of the words "students" and "employees" in the first part of the statement about demanding high performance. The small work group had listed employees first, with the rationale that the school system must demand high performance from its employees before it could demand the same from students. However, many attendees felt that placing students after teachers would be perceived as "putting students second." After much discussion—including a discussion led by AEL staff on the meaning of consensus—the ordering was reversed to students followed by employees. The second issue had to do with whether to include "healthy" as a trait the school system was developing in students. Several people wanted the word in the mission statement, but others contended that it belonged in the goals or objectives, and one person felt it was not fair to demand "healthy" as an outcome when students went home to unhealthy environments. The decision was made to leave "healthy" out of the mission statement. The meeting finished with the group prioritizing goal categories that would be fleshed out by another small work group.

Small work groups met several times in late March and April to tighten the goal categories into goal statements, to develop objectives under each goal, and to begin to list activities that would support the objectives. Everyone who had attended any of the strategic planning meetings was invited back to an April 30 meeting to revise and accept the draft strategic plan. The April 30 meeting was postponed until May 7, however, to provide time to make the goals complete. The evening of April 30 was used by the small work group to finish writing the goals and objectives.

Perhaps due to this last-minute change of dates, fewer people attended the celebratory meeting on May 7. At this meeting, the draft strategic plan was reviewed, and several minor revisions were made based on input from the group. The group suggested creating an oversight committee composed of community members, parents, and school staff to ensure that the strategic plan would be implemented by the school system. Group members were recruited to serve on the second phase of the strategic planning process to begin several months hence. After the plan was approved, certificates were given to each member of the planning group, and people had cake and chatted informally.

Attendance at Strategic Planning Meetings

Introductory Meetings

Among the 51 individuals who attended only the introductory meetings, 8 were from Hamlin, 11 were from Guyan Valley, 9 were from the Duval community, 18 were from Harts and 4 represented a countywide perspective.[1] The total number of community sectors presented below for each meeting will not equal the total number of people who attended, given that an individual could represent the viewpoint of more than one community sector (though only from one community).

On January 24, 2002, the first strategic planning introductory meeting was held at Hamlin High School. Of the 28 people in attendance, 19 were from the Hamlin community and 9 represented a more countywide perspective. The individuals represented many sectors of the community, and often a given individual represented the viewpoints of more than one community sector. At this meeting, the following community sectors were represented: 10 parents, 8 school personnel, 5 central office staff, 3 social service personnel, 2 individuals from the health care industry, 2 community leaders, 2 grandparents, and 1 person each representing the county school board, higher education, business, politics, and parent-teacher organizations.

Guyan Valley High School was the setting for the introductory meeting held on January 28, 2002. Of the 29 attendees, 16 were from the Guyan community, 9 represented a more countywide perspective, 2 individuals represented the Hamlin community, and 1 represented the Duval community (with 1 unknown). At this meeting there were 13 parents, 9 school personnel, 3 central office staff, 2 school board members, 1 individual representing the faith community, 1 grandparent, and 1 media representative.

The January 21, 2002, strategic planning introductory meeting was held at Harts High School. Forty-two people attended the meeting, with 32 representing the Harts community and 11 individuals representing a more countywide point of view. At this meeting there were 17 parents, 11 school staff, 4 central offices members, 4 higher education personnel, 4 social service employees, 3 students, 2 who represented community leaders, 2 school board personnel, and 1 individual who represented the faith community.

The February 7, 2002, introductory meeting was held at Duval High School. Thirty-two people attended, of whom 24 individuals represented the Duval community and 8 represented a

[1] Those representing a countywide perspective would be, for instance, employees at the school system's central office, social service employees who worked throughout the county, and politicians who represented the entire county.

more countywide perspective. There were 11 school staff, 12 parents, 5 central office personnel, 3 higher education members, a community leader, a member of the school board, a media representative and a school volunteer.

Large Group Strategic Planning Meetings

Five strategic planning meetings were held, the first of which was on February 12, 2002. Below is a list of community representation at each planning meeting. All the individuals who participated could represent one or more community sector, often representing both a type of employment as well as being the parent or grandparent of a child in the school system.

- Sixty-two people attended the first strategic planning meeting on February 12, 2002. Eleven attendees were from the Hamlin community, 6 individuals represented the Guyan Valley community, 12 individuals represented the Duval community, nine individuals represented the Harts community, and 24 represented a countywide perspective.
- The second strategic planning meeting was held on February 19, 2002. Fifty-six people attended. Eleven people participated from the Hamlin community, 3 from the Guyan Valley community, 12 from the Duval community, and 6 from the Harts community. Twenty-one individuals represented a countywide perspective.
- Of the 41 who attended the third strategic planning meeting on March 12, 4 were from Hamlin, 4 were from Guyan Valley, 9 were from Duval, and 3 were from Harts. Twenty-one individuals represented a countywide perspective.
- The fourth meeting was held on March 19, 2002. Thirty-eight people attended: 8 from Hamlin, 3 from Guyan Valley, 6 from Duval, 4 from Harts, and 17 representing a more countywide perspective.
- The fifth meeting was held on May 7, 2002. Twenty-four people attended, including 2 from Hamlin, 1 from Guyan Valley, 3 from Duval, 1 from Harts, and 17 representing a countywide perspective.

For the series of five meetings, 36 people attended one or two meetings, 30 attended three or four meetings, 14 attended all five meetings, and 51 people attended only one. Among those who attended less than half of the meetings, 10 were from Hamlin, 2 were from Guyan Valley, 9 were from Duval, 10 were from the Harts area, and 5 represented a countywide perspective. Among those who attended more than half of the meetings, 6 were from Hamlin, 4 were from Guyan Valley, 5 were from the Duval community, 3 from the Harts community, and 20 represented a countywide perspective. To improve readability of the report, only primary community sector affiliation is presented in Table 1 on the next page for all five strategic planning meetings. Primary affiliation is with the community sector individuals seemed to represent as determined by the evaluator, AEL facilitator, and a central office staff member (who was familiar with the people of the county) through participant comments at meetings.

Table 1

***Primary* Community Sector Representation at Each Large Strategic Planning Meeting**

Community Sector	February 12, 2002					February 19, 2002					March 12, 2002					March 19, 2002					May 7, 2002				
	Duval	Guyan Valley	Hamlin	Harts	Countywide	Duval	Guyan Valley	Hamlin	Harts	Countywide	Duval	Guyan Valley	Hamlin	Harts	Countywide	Duval	Guyan Valley	Hamlin	Harts	Countywide	Duval	Guyan Valley	Hamlin	Harts	Countywide
School Staff	5	6	4	5	1	3	3	4	5	1	4	3	1	3	1	2	2	1	2	-	1	-	-	-	-
Central Office	-	-	-	-	9	-	-	-	-	9	-	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	-	-	6
School Board	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Business	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Community Leader	1	-	3	2	-	2	-	2	-	-	2	-	2	-	-	1	-	3	-	-	1	-	1	-	-
Faith Community	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Health Care	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Higher Education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1
Parents/ Grandparents	6	2	2	2	-	6	-	3	1	-	3	1	-	1	-	2	1	2	2	-	-	1	-	-	-
Local Politics	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Social Service	-	-	2	1	2	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	1	-	1

Small Work Group Meetings

There were five small group meetings held, the first of which focused on fine-tuning the mission statement. Seven people attended this meeting, including two from the Duval area and five who represented a more countywide perspective. The second meeting focused on the goals. Six people attended, including two from Hamlin, one from Duval, one from Harts, and two representing a countywide perspective. Objectives were written at the third meeting, which was held at the central office in Hamlin. The third and fourth meetings were held to write the objectives for the strategic plan. Fourteen people attended the third meeting, including two from Hamlin, four from Duval, two from Harts, and six representing a countywide perspective. The fourth small work group meeting was attended by seven individuals, including one from Hamlin, two from Duval, and four who represented a countywide perspective. Attended by nine people, the fifth meeting was held to draft the activities. Two individuals were from Hamlin, one was from Guyan Valley, three were from Duval, and three represented a countywide perspective.

Strategic Planning Questionnaire

At the fourth meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee on March 19, 2002, the AEL evaluator distributed a two-page survey to attendees (see Appendix B). The survey included demographic items requesting information on the community sector(s) they represented, residence and employment in Lincoln County, reasons for participation, greatest challenge facing Lincoln County, what AEL staff had done well, and what AEL staff could have done better.

Demographics

Thirty-eight individuals attended the March 19, 2002, Strategic Planning Committee meeting. The 33 who remained until the end of the meeting completed the questionnaire. One item on the questionnaire asked respondents to place a checkmark next to the community sector(s) they represented, and a second checkmark next to the one community sector they felt they *best* represented. Table 2 presents the community sectors the attendees selected. Numbers add up to more than 33 because individuals could represent more than one community sector. Among the attendees were six who felt they best represented parents of children under age 18, four who best represented local business owners, four who best represented school or district staff, three best representing social service agency staff, two best representing teachers, two who best represented health care professionals, one who best represented "concerned citizens," five people who marked "other," and six who did not respond to the item.

Twenty-five (75.8%) of the respondents lived in Lincoln County. Residents had lived in the county from a minimum of two years (6.0%) to a maximum of 54 years (3.0%), with an average residence of 33.2 years (SD=17 years). Twenty-seven (81.8%) of the responding attendees worked in Lincoln County, and had done so from one to 51 years, with an average of 17.1 years (SD=12.6 years).

Table 2
Self-Reported Community Sector Representation at Strategic Planning Committee Meetings From Questionnaire

Community Sector	# Attendees	Percent
Concerned citizen	21	63.6%
Parent of child under age 18	10	30.3%
School or district administrative staff	8	24.2%
Local business owner or representative	7	21.2%
Social service agency targeting youth/families	4	12.1%
Teacher	4	12.1%
Faith community	4	12.1%
Health care	4	12.1%
Retired and/or elder care	1	3.0%
Other	9	27.3%
Grandparent of student	*3*	*9.1%*
Higher education	*2*	*6.1%*
Economic development representative	*1*	*3.0%*
Government	*1*	*3.0%*
Parent of child over age 18	*1*	*3.0%*
Parent resource center	*1*	*3.0%*

Main Reason for Participating

One open-ended item asked participants to report the main reasons for their involvement in the strategic planning process. Twenty of the 33 respondents listed a concern for the quality of education in Lincoln County as their main reason for participating. Exemplary quotes follow:

- "I want to help the students and school system to achieve their goals for a better education system."
- "Concern for the development of education to provide Lincoln County with a skilled/marketable labor force."
- "I wanted to make a difference in the educational system in my county."

Seven attendees stated that they wanted to be a part of something that was working toward the betterment of the county: "To help with the improvement of Lincoln [County]." Three respondents stated their main reason for participating as a concern for better education for their children: "I want where I live and love to live to give [my two children] what they need to succeed." Three respondents said they were asked to participate and agreed. One person said he or she felt it was "important for people to meet and work together." Another simply stated he or she had been involved in the process from "square one."

Group Climate, Task Focus and Collective Efficacy

The survey included 20 items scored on a forced-choice scale where 1 meant "Strongly Disagree" and 5 meant "Strongly Agree." The items targeted perceptions of group climate (GC), task focus (TF), and collective efficacy (CE). The intention of the seven group climate items was to measure people's perceptions of the cohesiveness and friendliness of people in the

meetings. The six task focus items were designed to measure the extent to which the group stayed to the agenda and seemed to participants to be making progress toward goals. Collective efficacy, six items, measured how likely participants felt it was that the group would accomplish its intended goals.

Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates were calculated on the three scales. The seven items of the group climate scale yielded an alpha reliability estimate of .76. The alpha for the task focus scale was .80, and the collective efficacy alpha was .89. Interest here was not on the scale-level statistics, however, but on the item responses. Responses to these climate, focus, and efficacy items are presented in Table 3, ranked from most positive mean score to least positive.

Table 3
Responses to Items Assessing the Group Climate (GC), Task Focus (TF), and Collective Efficacy (CE), Ranked From Most Positive Responses to Least Positive

Construct	Please circle the one answer per question that best describes your opinion about the Strategic Planning Group ("the group").	N	Mean	SD
GC	The facilitators try to make sure that everyone's opinions are heard.	33	4.45	.56
GC	Anyone who wants to participate in the planning process is made to feel welcomed by the group.	33	4.42	.50
TF	The facilitators keep the group on task.	33	4.42	.56
TF	The facilitators seem to know how to develop strategic plans.	32	4.31	.78
CE	This group has the capability of producing a strategic plan that will benefit our schools.	33	4.27	.80
GC	The group listens to what I have to say.	33	4.21	.42
TF	The people involved with the planning group seem deeply committed to its success.	33	4.21	.60
CE	This group has the capability of producing a strategic plan that will benefit our community.	33	4.21	.74
GC	The group is tolerant of differences or disagreements.	32	4.19	.69
GC	The group uses the abilities of all participants, not just a few.	33	4.18	.77
TF	The purpose of agenda items is kept in mind.	32	4.16	.68
TF	I am satisfied with the direction in which the planning group is going.	33	4.12	.78
CE	I believe the plan we are developing will improve the quality of life for our young people.	33	4.12	.93
CE	I believe that the plan we are developing will create a better school system in this county.	33	4.06	.90
GC	The group has a feeling of cohesiveness and team spirit.	33	4.06	.56
CE	The strategic plan will connect to what Lincoln County needs to become.	33	4.03	.77
TF	*The group is not efficient in getting things done.**	*32*	*2.00*	*.88*
GC	Everyone is involved in discussions, not just a few.	33	3.85	.67
CE	The key decision makers in our community are involved in this strategic planning process.	33	3.39	1.09
TF	*There has been too much talking and not enough decision making.**	*33*	*2.73*	*1.15*

** Items in italics are negatively worded, so a high score indicates a less positive response.*

As Table 3 illustrates, responses were fairly positive about the functioning of the strategic planning group itself. The climate and task focus of the group appear to have been positive as perceived by the attendees. Agreement with collective efficacy items was less strong. For instance, although with a mean of 4.06 respondents agreed with the item, "I believe the plan that we are developing will create a better school system in Lincoln County," there was a great deal of variance (almost one point on the scale) as compared to most of the other items.

Lincoln County's Greatest Challenge

One open-ended item on the questionnaire asked attendees to respond to the following prompt:

> *"In my opinion, the greatest challenge that Lincoln County faces in creating and carrying out a strategic plan for education is . . ."*

All 33 respondents completed the prompt. Thirteen attendees mentioned citizen apathy or lack of community involvement as the greatest challenge facing Lincoln County in carrying out the strategic plan. One said, "Getting over the attitude that 'it has always been this way, always will,'" while another phrased it, "To get those who are disinterested in their family members' obtaining high quality education and post-secondary education to become interested in bettering their lives." One person noted, "Overcoming parent and student and teacher apathy about the educational system in Lincoln County."

Eight attendees believed that the greatest challenge would be gaining consensus from all communities in Lincoln County. One said that the greatest challenge was "developing consensus across geographic and philosophical barriers."

Four believed that the greatest challenge would be to keep politics out of the implementation of the strategic plan. Three stated developing a broader curriculum and better educational system as the main challenge facing Lincoln County. Three other attendees thought that getting the strategic plan to be implemented would be the greatest challenge ("That it will get lost in the shuffle and won't guide us.") Finally, one person thought support would be the greatest challenge, while another mentioned money as the main challenge.

AEL's Performance as Facilitator

Attendees were asked two questions about AEL's role, including what AEL staff had done well, and what AEL staff could have done better in facilitating the strategic planning meetings. All respondents provided at least one response as to what AEL staff had done well. In total, there were 38 unique responses, with several individuals providing more than one response.

Sixteen respondents applauded AEL staff for keeping the group on task and focused. "Keeping the group on schedule while allowing for discussion" and "Ensuring that the group stays focused" were among the comments. Seven individuals praised AEL staff's organization skills, mentioning that AEL staff did well in "having a plan" and in "organizing the process." Five others mentioned that AEL staff had done a good job of leading "the group to become a team" and allowing "everyone to express opinions." Four noted that AEL staff had presented themselves very professionally, and had exhibited fairness and leadership. Four individuals said that AEL staff had done "everything" well. One person stated that the meetings were "presented in a manner that makes you think." The final comment was that AEL had "done well."

Fourteen attendees provided suggestions on what AEL staff could do to improve facilitation of strategic planning meetings. Four individuals suggested dropping "ice-breaker" activities and setting ground rules. Their comments included, "Don't waste time with things like 'Grouper, Grouper'" and, "No games! Do not treat us as students—our time is too important to do trivial things such as ground rules, etc." An equal number of people (three each) wanted the process either sped up or slowed down: "Bring thing together earlier in the process" versus "Lengthen meetings so we don't feel so rushed." One person would have liked AEL staff to involve more parents. Another would have liked smaller groups. One individual would have liked AEL staff to start the meetings earlier in the evening. Finally, one person thought AEL staff could have done a better job of "telling people to be quiet."

Interviews with Lincoln County Residents

Interviews were conducted with Lincoln County residents who had either attended some or all of the strategic planning meetings or who had attended an introductory meeting and had not attended the planning meetings. The purpose of these interviews was to gauge people's perceptions of the strategic planning process and perceived quality of relationships between residents and the school system.

Sample Selection

A stratified sampling framework divided the interview pool by attendance rate at meetings and by role (school system employee or community member). Attendance was tracked at the introductory meetings, the five strategic planning meetings ("large group" meetings), and at five small work group sessions. In order to not penalize those who came to the optional small work group meetings during the day but could not come to all the large group meetings in the evenings, and to give slightly more weight to attendance at the large group meetings, two attendance rates were calculated: the percentage of all 10 meetings attended and the percentage of the large group meetings attended. These two percentages were then averaged. Those whose combined average attendance was 50% or higher were considered "Frequent Attendees," and those who attended at least one meeting but less than a combined 50% were "Less Frequent Attendees." The final group consisted of those who had attended one of the introductory meetings at one of the four high schools but did not attend any of the strategic planning meetings or small work group sessions (the "Nonattendees").

Each group was then divided by role into school system employees and community members. The number of people selected from each group to be interviewed was 75% of the total number of Frequent Attendees. Including the superintendent and assistant superintendent, there were 13 school system personnel and 16 community members who attended an average of 50% or more of the large and small group meetings. Seventy-five percent of the Frequent Attendees' group resulted in a sample of 22 individuals, with the sample stratified into 10 school system personnel and 12 community members. Within the stratum of role (school system versus non-school system), individuals were randomly selected with the exception of the superintendent and assistant superintendent, who were both interviewed. Twenty-two individuals were also chosen from the Less Frequent Attendees and Nonattendees, maintaining the ratio of 55% community members and 45% school system personnel.

Individual phone interviews were conducted from mid-May until the end of June 2002 using the interview protocols found in Appendix C. Not all interviewees could be reached during this period and data collection was ended on June 30. The final sample included 21 Frequent Attendees, 12 Less Frequent Attendees, and 13 Nonattendees. One Less Frequent Attendee and two Nonattendees refused to be interviewed. For one Nonattendee the evaluator could not find a current phone number in service. Table 4 displays the final stratified sample. It is clear that the sample of low frequency attendees did not conform to the 55% to 45% ratio of community members to school system personnel, and that the final sample includes fewer low frequency attendees and Nonattendees than had been planned.

Table 4
Stratified Sample of People Interviewed About the Strategic Planning Process

Attendance Group	*Number in Original Pool*	*Number Selected for Interview*	*Number Interviewed*	
			School System Personnel	*Community Members*
Nonattendees	51*	20	4	9
Less Frequent Attendees	54	20	8	4
Frequent Attendees	29	21**	10	11

** Five of these individuals were students under age 18. Parental consent forms were sent to the homes of each of these students in the hope of including one to two in the interviews. However, no signed consent forms were returned.*

***The superintendent and assistant superintendent were included in the school system personnel chosen to be interviewed. The remaining 19 were randomly selected from the available pool.*

Perceptions of the Strategic Planning Process

Perceptions of Nonattendees. A sample of those individuals who attended one of the introductory meetings but did not attend any of the strategic planning meetings was asked for reactions to the strategic planning process as it was described at the introductory meetings and about their reasons for choosing not to participate. Three of the 13 individuals felt that the meetings were not going to be about what they were interested in, and that they would not have their questions about high school consolidation answered. Therefore, they were not interested in continuing to participate. Two people thought that the process was to create a plan that was "based too far in the future." As one parent said, "My son is in school now and that is when I want to see something happen." Eight nonattendees thought that the process of the meetings was interesting and well organized. One of these individuals commented, "The meeting was fine and they did a good job, but I just didn't know whether it would do any good or not." Another parent opined, "I thought that it was a good process. It covered a lot of territory and gave the people a chance to contribute."

A school system employee thought that the process, as it was explained, would require more time of people than it should: "I felt that we were going to have a dozen meetings to come up with a mission statement that five or six of the key people could have come up with in no time ... Too much feel-good stuff and not enough work." Finally, one school member felt a lot of tension at the introductory meeting held at Duval High School. This individual commented, "I felt that part of the idea was that it was held as a requirement. My initial feeling was that it was a

state-mandated program. I don't know how it proceeded from that ... I also felt that there was a lot of tension in the meeting that I attended, which may have subsided in subsequent meetings."

Nonattendees were also asked what some of the reasons were that they chose not to participate in the strategic planning process. Responses fell into two main categories. Five individuals thought the process would not be relevant to their concerns or would not seek genuine input. Said one parent from the Duval area, "I just felt that they were going through the formality of having the meeting because they had to. I felt that they had already made up their minds and they already had the mission statement set. Also, I felt they did not really want our input." Another parent from the Hamlin area addressed the issue of the new high school: "It wasn't what I thought it was. I wanted my questions answered about the new high school. Now they say it won't open until 2005, and I would like to have some of my concerns addressed about that."

Eight interviewees said they did not participate because of scheduling conflicts, other obligations, and travel distance. As a member of a parent-teacher organization said, "All the meetings were held in one area of the county. It is a 30 to 45 minute drive for me to Hamlin. If more meetings were held in my area, then I would have attended them all. Also, 6:30 is too late to drive that far and then still get home to get the kids ready for bed." Others mentioned family obligations, such as helping children with homework, as the reason they did not participate. Basketball also conflicted with people's ability to participate. Two people who had attended the introductory meetings did not continue because the meetings conflicted with high school basketball games.

Opinions about the Process. The first question asked of those who attended strategic planning sessions was about meeting productivity and efficiency. While all respondents who attended the small work group meetings thought they were productive, opinions were more divided about the large strategic planning meetings. Twenty-five respondents thought the meetings were productive and efficient. Eleven individuals did not feel the meetings were productive and efficient. Those who responded positively discussed the inclusiveness of the process ("Everyone had the opportunity to have input"), and the productivity achieved by remaining focused on the tasks ("They were run according to the agenda, we stayed focused, and when we got off it was brought back"). A school system employee thought, "The meetings were really helpful. They gave a lot of information to the whole community. The people presenting had a lot of good ideas."

Most of the people who responded positively commented on the organization and structure of the process. One parent said:

> The organization was good as far as being able to get anybody there. When you said you were going to have a meeting you had it. And that hasn't always happened in the past. You stuck to the time. Sometimes I thought we should have went over, you all stuck to "here's what we're going to do."

The opinion of a community member who attended all or most of the meetings changed as the meeting series went on. This participant commented:

> I thought in the beginning that it was very productive and efficient, but by about the third meeting, we just had too much information

> to try to do in that amount of time and we seemed to lose a lot of people. I don't know if it had to do with that or if people had other stuff to do.

Of those who were less positive about the process' productivity and efficiency, one member summed up the process this way: "I would say very productive with a caveat. I don't think some of the people understood how long this was going to take and toward the end became a little frustrated. I was a little disappointed with the stick-to-itiveness of the people, especially those who are going to be driving this process in the schools." Others also mentioned confusion about the purpose or length of the process. A parent commented:

> I heard a lot of people asking questions. We are doing something but we don't really know what it is. I think everyone was there for a good reason, but it seemed there was more to it than that. If at the beginning someone had announced that we're here to discuss schools and do Lincoln County commission planning but that's not what was said.

A community leader also noted confusion:

> I didn't quite understand why I was there in the first place. I don't understand what the final outcome is going to be. I didn't attend the last one and I thought when I went that we, as a group, would be making some distinct recommendations about the future of education. The process seemed to accumulate a lot of ideas but no distinct recommendations for the future.

One participant simply did not think that the outcome of such a process could be productive because of county politics: "I really don't know whether they will be that productive in my years. Maybe later on, but I come from way back, and I felt that the political process has always dictated what we get, and it hasn't always been good." A school system employee was offended by the "rules" with which the facilitators started the process, saying:

> One thing that bothered me was that we were not allowed to mention consolidation in the meetings. We were told at the beginning that we should not mention it and ... that kind of insulted some people. We felt that the facilitators viewed us as rude before the meeting even started.

With any large group, there will be tensions between people who are more process oriented and those who are product oriented. Five participants thought that certain activities were a waste of time and made the meetings less productive than they could have been. Said one member of the business community, "I thought we had a lot of wasted time. One of those things was Grouper Grouper. I thought that was an unproductive exercise. Some of the break out groups that we got into we probably wasted some time with." Two other respondents, both school members, also thought that the Grouper Grouper exercise wasted time. Activities could have been condensed into fewer meetings, with less time spent devising a mission statement and more time spent on goals and objectives—"the meat and potatoes" as one person said. One parent was very dissatisfied with the process:

> To be honest, there was a lot of time spent with very little productivity, and I work in an environment where you have to "get it" and move on. And I felt like one paragraph should not take hours and hours to do ... I gave a lot of my time and I didn't feel it was very worthwhile. I don't want to spend any more time talking about it. So much time spent debating on where a comma should go or where one word should go, whether in the mission statement or in the objectives.

Participants were asked the degree to which different community sectors and communities were represented at the strategic planning meetings. Ten participants believed that all major constituencies were well represented at the meetings ("Every facet was there, everyone was given the opportunity."). Five commented that members from all stakeholder groups were invited, though not all chose to participate. One school personnel member opined, "Invitees as opposed to actually attending? A lot of people were invited. A lot of people went once then went back home, but because we didn't talk about consolidation, they dropped out. There is still a small fraction group out there and they have an agenda and if we don't cover that agenda, they don't want to come."

Most of the respondents named stakeholder groups they believed were missing from the process. One thought there were too many school people and not enough community members involved. Four people, one from each of the four county communities, thought that the politicians of the county should have been represented at the meetings, acknowledging that the problem was not that these individuals were not invited but that they chose not to attend ("If the powers that be were concerned about children, they would have already taken care of it and we wouldn't be where we are."). [2] Seven respondents wished there had been more parents, teachers and students at the meetings. A couple of people noted an insufficient representation of people from the Harts area. A few people wanted to see more school administrators there, but others wanted more teachers present with fewer administrators. Five people mentioned a need for more community members, especially representation of low-income residents.

Perceptions of Decision Makers' Intention to Use the Strategic Plan. Participants were asked to what extent they believed that school system decision makers would refer to the strategic plan when setting new policy or programming. Five people—three infrequent attendees and two nonattendees—responded that they did not know whether the decision makers would refer to the plan. Two individuals provided responses that did not fit into larger categories. One stated that the process wasn't what he or she thought it would be but more about economic development, and the other said, "I believe that it will take a while before anyone acts."

Seven of those interviewed expressed hope that the school system would refer to the strategic plan, although these individuals had doubts. Said one community leader from the Duval area who had attended most of the meetings, "I'm hoping that it will be the centerpiece, but that remains to be seen. They'll have to prove it to me." One parent from Hamlin who did not attend the meetings commented, "I hope they use it 100%, but I am not sure they will. Lincoln County is politically run. I hate to be negative, but I have lived here all my life."

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[2] A few of the county's politicians did attend introductory meetings and/or the main strategic planning meetings.

Twenty-two of the 46 respondents believed that the school system would refer to the strategic plan when setting policy or programming. Of these 22, plus the 7 "hopeful" individuals, all but 6 thought the decision makers were local to the county, be they the local district-level administrators (e.g., superintendent) or principals and teachers. Three of the 6 remaining thought that politicians made decisions for the school system, and 3 mentioned the state board of education as the decision-making authority in the school system.

These 22 individuals represented all levels of meeting attendance, all communities, and many different community sector perspectives. Nine of them thought the plan would be referred to, and 13 of them believed that the plan would be referred to some of the time. Of those who thought the plan would be referred to, the following are typical responses. A businessperson said, "From what I gathered I think they will follow the plan. I feel confident they will." A parent said, "I think that it's going to be a major piece. It's required, and if we are going to make change, we've got to maintain that focus." A school system employee from the Harts area who attended a few meetings thought, "They will look at early childhood, health issues, higher education and vocational training. I really think the superintendent will use the plan."

Some of those individuals who thought the plan would be referred to some of the time believed that barriers to plan use would be from sources outside the county. Said one school system employee who had attended most meetings, "I think about 85% [will be used]. They were really involved and really believed in the whole process. Some [goals] will depend on the state policy and state mandates as to whether they can be accomplished or not." One school system employee who had not attended the meetings held this opinion: "I think [the plan] will be less than 50% [used]. I think it was done to pacify people such as policymakers. It was good to see all the different people out, but I don't know how much they will use the information."

Others thought the barriers would be internal to Lincoln County. A school system employee who had attended a few meetings said, "I think whenever it's convenient to suit the needs that they want to represent, then they'll use it. If it supports what they're trying to do, they'll use it; otherwise they won't refer to it." A community leader who attended most meetings stated, "As of right now, as of who the decision makers are right now, they will refer to it on a regular basis. Once the state board of education no longer has control of education in this county, politics may play an important role in the decision making rather than the strategic plan."

Ten of the 46 people interviewed did not believe that the decision makers would refer to the strategic plan. Seven of these individuals thought the decision makers were politicians or the state board of education; i.e., decision makers were driven by politics or policy. Two of the others thought the main decision maker was the county superintendent, and one thought the principals and teachers made the decisions for the schools. These 10 people included 3 school system personnel who had attended most or all of the meetings; 3 community people who had attended a few of the meetings; and 4 individuals who had not attended the planning meetings, including 2 parents, a school system employee, and an individual representing a countywide interest[3]. Said a school system employee, "My fear is that this is an exercise that is paper-based and will not find its way into the day-to-day decision making. I'm not optimistic. I don't feel it will drive their activities and beliefs and I feel that it should." A parent who did not attend

[3] Describing this individual's community sector would compromise confidentiality, as there was only one representative from that community sector.

meetings commented, "I don't think they will refer to it at all. I think they already have their minds made up as to what they are going to do and nothing we say really matters."

Opinions on Whether the Plan Will Make a Difference. When asked whether or not they thought the strategic plan would make a difference in education in the county, five respondents, including one frequent attendee and four less frequent attendees, did not know. Three individuals, including one frequent attendee and two who did not attend meetings, thought that the plan might make a difference. As one parent who did not attend meetings said:

> The plan will possibly make a difference in education in the county. I talked with some of the people that attended and they liked the idea the way it was presented. They think the plan will work if it is enacted the way that it was presented to them; however, they feel that the plan was already developed and they were just invited as a formality. Also, in order for the plan to work the parents will need to come together and that is going to be difficult to accomplish.

Twenty-four interviewees thought the plan would make a difference in the quality of education provided in Lincoln County. Of these, 13 attended most or all of the meetings, 7 attended a few meetings, and 4 did not attend any meetings other than one of the introductory meetings. Interestingly, three-fourths of those interviewed from the Harts area, compared to half of those from Hamlin, believed the plan would make a difference. Many of these people believed that the plan will make a difference by focusing school improvement efforts on specific predefined goals. Said a school system employee, "I think there are going to be some goals, and as long as we use those goals as a reference for where we're going ... and all decisions should be based on those goals, like where the money is spent. Resources should be directed toward the goals. Then the plan should make a difference." A couple of respondents said that the plan will make a difference because people in the county have ownership of the plan and will see that it is implemented. A school system employee who attended most meetings said, "I think [the plan will make a difference] because we've put so much time and we've addressed needs and come up with answers and so many people have ownership of the plan. We'll have more efficient curriculum, planning, and evaluation." Others commented that the plan would make a difference *if* it is fully implemented. One school system employee was skeptical about the plan ever being fully carried out: "The implementation will make a difference. I think to a degree it will be implemented, but over a period of time it will fall by the wayside, as so many of these things do."

Fourteen people who were interviewed did not believe that the strategic plan would make a difference in education in Lincoln County. Half of those who thought it would make no difference were individuals who had not attended any of the strategic planning meetings other than the introductory meeting. Of the remaining 7, 5 were people who had attended all or most of the strategic planning meetings, and 2 had attended a few meetings. Almost half of the people who thought it would make no difference were school system personnel. One parent said, "I hope so, but I don't think it will. The people who run the board of education in Lincoln County are concerned with what they want, which is consolidation. I don't think it will help the schools or the students whatsoever. They have to do it the way they are doing it to get what they want." A school system employee who did not attend meetings said, "What one says and what one does have to be congruent, and I have not seen that with the leadership in Lincoln County." Another

nonattendee thought, "It might, but I don't think so. The community is not very involved. The parents care more about a football or baseball game than if the schools are consolidated. Community members don't show up to school board meetings unless the issue is sports."

Influence in What Occurs in Lincoln County Schools. Interview respondents were asked how much influence they feel they have over what occurs in Lincoln County schools. Those individuals who had attended strategic planning meetings were also asked whether they believed the extent of their influence had changed as a result of participating in the strategic planning process. One community leader who had attended most or all of the meetings felt that he or she had made a difference even before the strategic planning process by writing letters to the editor of the local paper regarding education-related issues. A parent who had not attended the strategic planning meetings did not know how much influence she or he had, though she or he volunteered at the school. A Harts resident who attended a few of the strategic planning meetings thought he or she could have a great influence "if I set my mind to it." A social services employee works "to try to have influence."

Four people who had attended a few meetings and four people who had not attended strategic planning meetings did not feel that they had any influence over what occurred in the schools. A retiree from the Hamlin area who had attended a few meetings thought, "Right now I have no power at all. To be honest, it does no good to go to the paper or whatever because nothing is going to change." In commenting on community involvement in the strategic planning process, one parent from the Duval area said, "As an individual, I don't have a lot of influence, but in groups you can gain support for the issues and have a lot. I think an individual can have an influence by gathering groups together."

Fourteen respondents believed that they had a little influence over what occurred in the schools. Five of these were people who had attended all or most of the meetings. Half of them were school system employees. A school employee from the Harts area who had attended a few meetings said, "I do not feel that I have much influence over what occurs in the schools. I do feel that everybody has a right to voice their opinion, but I'm not sure how much they'll listen." Another Harts resident who had not attended planning meetings commented, "I feel that I have little influence over what occurs in the schools. I think that parents as a whole would have a lot of influence if they became more involved." Five of the 10 strategic planning participants who felt they had little influence did believe that the extent of their influence had changed as a result of participating in the planning process. Two noted that relationships between community members and school authorities were strengthened. A businessperson from Hamlin said, "Before I attended these meetings I would have said none, but now that I know some of the central office staff, I feel like they would at least listen to me." The other three felt that school administrators were more likely to listen to them now that they had participated in the process. Said a school system employee, "My opinion may at least be listened to by administrators and other faculty, whereas earlier that would not have been the case."

Fifteen of the interviewees felt they had some influence over what occurred in the schools. These included 8 frequent meeting attendees, 2 less frequent attendees, and 5 who did not attend meetings. Eight of the 15 were employees of the school system. A Harts resident who attended most meetings commented lightly, "I think I'm just a voice in the wilderness, but I'm sure I'm heard." A school system employee said "I have a voice in the process." Of the 10 who had attended strategic planning meetings, 60% thought their level of influence had changed as a result of participating. One school system employee thought he or she had a better

understanding of the people in all four communities and has changed attitudes in dealing with different issues. Another school employee from Guyan Valley felt "more comfortable with all parties involved, even people that I had never met before," and further said, "It has changed the extent of my influence through my own realization that other people want to change as well." A frequent attendee from the Harts area thought that the extent of his or her influence had changed because individuals had approached him or her with questions about the process.

Of the six individuals who felt they had a great deal of influence, four worked for the school system, one worked in social services, and one was a parent. All of these individuals attended all or most of the strategic planning meetings. The school system employees worked at the central office, and thus it makes sense that they felt they had a lot of influence over what occurred in the schools. Even with the large amount of influence they felt they had over the school system, three of these individuals also felt that the extent of their influence had grown as a result of participating in the strategic planning process.

Perceptions of Relationships Between Residents and the School System in Lincoln County

Telephone interview respondents were asked how unified they felt Lincoln County was as one community. Only 1 of the 46 respondents believed that Lincoln County was unified. This individual, a school employee, thought that the strategic planning process had brought the county together, saying, "It has really come together. It is a great community. Everyone seems to want to help one another."

Unity in Lincoln County. Six people thought the county was partially unified. One county resident noted that the children in the different communities seemed to get along with one another well and that it is the children who lie at the heart of the county's chances for becoming unified. Another resident remarked that relationships are not as adversarial as they once were, and that people are learning to work together and to accept things. A school employee commented, "They are about 75% unified. We're spaced out so far and that makes it hard for people to come together."

The majority of respondents (39 of 46), however, believed that the county was not unified. The causes attributed to the lack of unification were varied. Many (15) mentioned geography as a major underlying cause of fragmentation; the mountains, poor roads, and long travel times made it difficult for people in the four communities to feel united with one another. A respondent explained, "Right now, it is a divided community because of the way we are situated, so isolated from one another. It's 35 miles from the northern to the southern part. We have a lot going on in between. The mountains ... the geography separates us. I hope we'll have highways someday." A school system employee remarked:

> It's so territorial. We all want the same thing, but we want it in our area. Nobody wants to help anybody. We are totally different in all four areas. Our cultures, our views, and our lifestyles are so different.

Each community tends to associate itself not with other communities within the county but with geographically closer communities in the adjacent counties. A parent pointed out:

> The whole county centers on belonging to the high schools—"I live in the Duval area." We tend to migrate toward Charleston here in the Duval area. Harts migrates toward Logan. Guyan

> Valley migrates toward Huntington. Some in Hamlin go toward Teays Valley, but they're split, some go toward Huntington, some toward Charleston. When Lincoln County was formed, each of the surrounding counties gave up bits and pieces, so it's the history of it.

Consolidation is another divisive factor, mentioned or implied by 11 of the respondents. The issue has created rivalry between communities beyond that arising out of high school sporting events. A school board member commented that the county is less united than ever "because this school thing has got everyone looking out for themselves and not caring what happens to anyone else." Discussing the proposed consolidated high school, a school employee explained, "There's the perception that when my kids go into that community they won't be treated as well as the kids who live in the community. A lot of it is fear of the unknown." A parent expressed it this way:

> Concerning the school system, very divided. It's because of the consolidation issue, and some of the communities feel they have no influence and no power in decision making at all. Everything is under state control. At least in another county, if you are not happy, you can vote for or against board members. You can't do that in this county.

Geography, consolidation, affiliations with cities in other counties instead of with other Lincoln County communities, and other factors have all contributed to an "us versus them," or "haves versus have-nots," mentality that many respondents claimed is the root of divisiveness in the county. Said a school system employee, "It's almost like three against one. It's Harts against the world. Hamlin is the haves and they are the have-nots." Others thought there was a general "other communities versus Hamlin" mentality in the county. A businessperson remarked, "It's looked at that the Hamlin people are the city people, and Hamlin gets everything into their school systems, and it's jealousy is what it amounts to. The other systems look at Hamlin as getting all the special treatment and I don't think that is the case." One parent with a different opinion said, "A lot of people feel that Hamlin gets everything because it's the county seat, and people in Hamlin think things should stay there. I think Hamlin realizes it gets everything." Another parent also noted resentment toward Hamlin, saying, "There are a lot of hurt feelings, mistrust, and just overall bad feelings between the community members." Finally, one resident, commenting on the fluidity of the "us versus them" mentality, said, "Depends on the issues and circumstances. The us's and thems change."

Changing Relationships Among the Four Subcommunities. One question on the interview protocol asked respondents whether they thought relationships among people from the four Lincoln County high school communities had changed as a result of the strategic planning process. Of the 31 strategic planning participants who responded to the question, 13 thought that relationships had not changed as a result of the process, though 5 of them believed the groundwork had been laid for changes to occur eventually. Several mentioned that with no media (newspaper) coverage of the process, and not enough people from each community participating, the level of idea saturation within the communities needed to foster change had not been reached.

Eighteen of the 31 people who answered the question had noticed changes among people from the four communities. Seven of the 18 had noted changes in the relationships among strategic planning participants, though not necessarily among residents who had not participated. One resident said, "Individuals are beginning to see the needs of all the communities, not just their community. This applies to the individuals who have participated in the planning process. It is the responsibility of these people to inform others in the community." A businessperson said that witnessing the working relationship that was established between people from the four high school areas gave him the impression "that they were all trying to accomplish the same thing, for the first time in my life." Almost all of those who had seen changes remarked that communication and understanding had improved among people from the four communities. A school system employee said, "Any time we're together it helps, and we're able to talk and to plan. Just like any time we get the children together it helps." One respondent commented, "I think they understand each other better. Everyone realizes that they are going through the same things, such as consolidation, discipline problems, et cetera. At least there is dialogue now between the residents."

Relationship between School System and Residents. A question was asked regarding respondents' opinions about the nature of the relationship between residents and the school system. When responses were not specific, this general question was followed up with probes about the different components of the school system, including the state board of education and the West Virginia Department of Education, the local schools, the central office, and the county board of education.

Residents had mixed opinions regarding the perceived relationship among Lincoln County residents and the state board of education and the West Virginia Department of Education. In general, reactions were overwhelmingly negative; however, five people—four of whom had attended all or most meetings—suggested that people are realizing improvements may come with the intervention of the state. Said one parent, "There is a relationship there. They are depending and relying on the state to smooth everything out and decide what's going to happen. Depending on the state to fix the problems." A community leader offered this humorous analogy: "Having the state board of education take over the school system in Lincoln County is like going to the hospital to have some embarrassing surgery performed. You are embarrassed that everyone knows you had the surgery done, but you are sure glad you had it done."

Seventeen of 46 respondents believed residents did not have any relationship with the state-level educational entities. A school employee said, "We don't have much of a relationship there. We're being guided and we're accepting what's there." Another school employee offered, "There is really no relationship. There is no bearing because the state is going to do what [it wants] to do—period!"

This negative tone was more explicit in the responses of 11 respondents who indicated that a poor relationship existed between residents and the state. A parent offered these reflections:

> This relationship, if there is one, is pretty poor. The residents have no faith in the system. They feel the state came in and took over to consolidate, not to better the schools. The county residents have voted against consolidation for years and now the state is going to do it anyway.

A community leader spoke even more negatively about the state's perceived single-focused agenda to consolidate:

> The state board concocted a plan to take over the school system and you heard nothing but negative things about the school system. You heard not one positive word. And it was done for consolidation purposes ... Publicly the superintendent says the negatives, but he's here for one purpose—consolidation.

A common feeling throughout most responses was residents' frustration with the state entities, which they perceive to have wrested all control and all voice away from them. Again, on the theme of consolidation, a school system employee said:

> You have a lot of resentment from a lot of people because of what has been going on...the fact that decisions are being made in Charleston without the people visiting Lincoln County to see what is really going on and the implications of the decisions that they are making. They should have to come out here and ride a bus for an hour and a half to two hours before they decide that the kids should.

A few people noted that people's perceptions of the relationship depended on where one asked the question. A central office staff member commented, "[the relationship] has gotten better since the takeover. They feel some changes are being made. The politicians don't like it because they've lost their control. The average citizens like the improvements, but they don't like the consolidation and they are looking at the state as the bad guy. [Depending on] where you go you get a totally different perspective."

Very different from the perceptions noted above were the perceptions of the relationships between residents and local schools. Thirty-three respondents (72%) believed residents had a good, supportive relationship with their local schools. A person involved in politics observed, "It's a positive relationship. The majority of parents support their local school. I think people feel they can communicate with the schools more." A parent agreed, saying, "Most families get behind their local schools—at least the parents that support their children."

Four respondents thought that, in general, a negative relationship existed between residents and the local schools. A parent commented, "It seems like the parents don't care. The parents don't help their kids, and then, when the child doesn't do well in school, then they want to jump on the teachers. The parents are not taking their responsibility." However, others expressed very different reasons for the poor relationship. A school system employee explained:

> The ones who have a good relationship are the ones with the good kids, the ball players and the band people. There are a lot of troubled and special needs kids, and I think that our school system does not deal well with those parents. Principals don't talk to them as human beings. And parents think there is no point talking to anyone with the school system. The school system is going to have to value parents as equals.

The remainder of the respondents qualified their answers, saying the quality of the relationship depends on whether a school has active parent participation, or the geographic and

economic region where the school is located. For example, a central office staff member said, "[The relationship] depends on the background of the parent. A lot of them are uninvolved. In a lot of cases, the schools are still regarded as the enemy because they had a bad experience ... I think we have a long way to go."

Twenty respondents believed that county residents viewed the county school board mainly in terms of its powerlessness during this period of state takeover. A community leader said, "At the present time, people don't need to think about them. They have no power or influence over what is going on. It really doesn't matter because [the board] can't do anything. Their hands are tied." Despite the board's powerlessness, several residents perceived the relationship between board and community to be good. A school system employee said, "We're in a state takeover and [the board members] don't have much of a say. However, there is a good relationship because they do try to look out for everyone." Another 10 respondents also had positive impressions of the relationships between residents and the county school board. "We just had an election and two of the incumbents were reelected. People must have had confidence in the present board or they wouldn't have sent two back for another term," reasoned a resident who had attended most of the strategic planning meetings.

Four people characterized the relationship as nonexistent and one person did not know enough to want to offer an opinion. A central office staff member commented, "People in our county do not interact or know about what the board of education is about. And I'm talking parents who really need to know this stuff." The remaining 12 respondents thought the relationship was poor. Respondents from the Harts and Duval areas thought the board was too far removed from their areas for there to be a positive relationship. "The parents don't feel like they have input or are listened to," said one. Another commented, "The relationship is not that great because we are on the other end of the county and are not considered as far as opinions." Other respondents noted the relationship was characterized by a lack of trust. One said, "Even though they vote for them, they don't trust them."

When respondents were asked their perception on the nature of the relationship between residents and central office administrators, six believed there was no relationship, with one parent putting it, "Most people don't even know who the central office staff is. There's a disconnect there." Three respondents did not feel they knew enough about it to have formed an opinion. Two respondents thought it depended on what part of the county a resident was from, and two replied that the relationship was "alright."

Nineteen respondents characterized the relationship in negative terms. Six believed that residents lacked trust in the central office administrators. A central office staff member noted that residents seemed to take the attitude that, "You're going to have to show me you can make it better." Others commented on other negative qualities of the relationship. One politically active community member commented, "It seems that there is resentment that the top people are making all of the decisions. The central office administrators are not well accepted." A parent reflected on experiences she and those she has known have had with central office administrators, saying, "It's foreign. There is no reason to go there, no reason to ask for help from there. Ultimately they just back up what the schools say." Another parent noted people's disillusionment with having outsiders in the central office: "It is at an arm's length stand-off. They believe our superintendent and assistant superintendent are here on a mission. They feel that whatever those two do is a situation they won't have to live with for a long period of time and they can walk away from it."

Almost as many respondents (14) characterized the relationship in positive or supportive terms. Several have noticed that central office administrators have been trying "to build a relationship with the different communities," as a community member from the social services sector said. A member of the business community remarked, "I think [the superintendent and assistant superintendent] are doing a good job and I think people will see that in time." A school employee was also positive, saying, "[Central office staff members] help out in every way they can."

Changes in School System-Community Relationships. Respondents were asked if they believed the relationships between the communities in Lincoln County and the Lincoln County School System had changed at all as a result of the strategic planning process. Four respondents said they had not seen evidence of changed relationships. Three said they did not know if relationships had changed, and, similarly, 11 respondents remarked that it was too soon to tell whether or not relationships would change as a result of the process. As a central office staff member said, "It's too early to tell. Outside of the people who were at the meetings, no one knows anything about it. I don't think it's out there yet." A school employee said, "I hope they will be improved, but I think it is too early to tell."

Fifteen respondents, however, had seen changes in the relationships between residents and the school system since the strategic planning process began. A third of these respondents had witnessed changes between strategic planning participants (who were mainly residents) and the school system. Illustrating the perspective of the school system, a central office employee commented, "The ones who were here have gotten a better understanding of each other and the role of the school system. The naysayers who didn't come will always be the naysayers and you can't change that. Some of the people have done some good things to support what we are doing." A resident of the Hamlin area thought there was more understanding between the parties, and described how he or she benefited from the process this way: "Getting to understand that the new school is for the whole county. Asking input from the whole county. The meetings were open to give everyone the opportunity to come together." A parent concurred, saying, "They seem to want to work together more and they listen to each other."

Conclusions

One outcome measure of the strategic planning process in Lincoln County is whether or not the state board of education approves the strategic plan that emerged from this community engagement initiative. This outcome is still to be realized, as the Lincoln County representatives are to present the plan to the state board of education in January 2003. AEL can learn several lessons from this community involvement effort.

- The process attracted many people who were not direct employees of the school system, nor residents of the county. Community leaders, business people, people in social services and health care, and other community sectors participated along with various representatives of the school system. Noticeably absent, however, were many of the political power brokers of the county, as well as poorer residents and students. These groups can be characterized, then, as hard-to-reach populations.
- AEL did not take an active role in recruiting residents to participate in the strategic planning process. This conscious decision to place the burden of recruitment and retention in the hands of the central administration signifies AEL's philosophical stance toward community engagement efforts—one that remains neutral on issues not directly related to the planning process itself. AEL staff did tell planning group participants that staff would maintain a neutral position, that AEL was not allied with any one group, and that AEL's allegiance was to the children of Lincoln County. Many participants who were interviewed appreciated AEL's stance. Other models would have been possible, such as a model in which AEL staff would have been actively recruiting community members from groups not represented, contacting and attempting to recruit the county's politicos, and articulating to the group the disadvantages and limitations associated with a plan that did not include the viewpoints of all those with the power to override or implement decisions, as well as of the traditionally disenfranchised groups. One suggestion for AEL staff is, when working with community groups, to acknowledge other community engagement models and note the reasons for choosing a model emphasizing neutrality.
- The process as it was implemented was satisfactory to most of the participants. Those who participated throughout the series of meetings, and thus were present at the fourth meeting to complete the questionnaire, were satisfied with the process, with the exception of the "Grouper Grouper" exercise. Some people felt confused by the inclusion of health care and economic development in a strategic planning process for education; they stopped attending the strategic planning sessions, not understanding that the mission was for Lincoln County and the strategic plan was to be about how the school system could support that mission.
- A sizeable minority believed the process took more time than was needed. Balancing a respect for people's time with a respect for everyone's input is no easy task. While this initiative in Lincoln County can be considered a success, AEL staff should consider continuing to refine its process for this kind of community engagement task. Admittedly, this was a "trial run" for AEL staff, who had conducted a similar effort in only one other school district. The lessons learned in Lincoln County will prove useful in improving facilitation efforts in other districts in the future.

- Many participants reported being motivated by a deep-seated desire to create a better educational system in the county. These individuals would be counted in any measure of the community's assets as valuable resources.
- The people who participated viewed citizen apathy as a major barrier confronting any reform efforts in the county. However, these participants may have been more "involved" than the average citizen. Therefore, this perspective is not necessarily an accurate reflection of citizen engagement or apathy in the county.
- Politics came up repeatedly as a barrier to improving Lincoln County schools. This is an interesting perception, given that the head of the state senate's education committee at the time was a representative from Lincoln County. Politics internal to Lincoln County, including cronyism and a state senator promoting consolidation, appeared to be a major concern to residents eager to see improvements. These residents, however, also distrusted state-level institutions, a distrust solidly based in the history of the relationship between county residents and the state board of education. Distrust and wariness of those in power—no matter who or what entity—peppered comments about relationships in the county and belief in the strategic planning process.
- If distrust was common among those who chose to become actively involved in the process, how distrustful were those residents who chose not to become involved? A perceived lack of genuineness on the part of the school system to seek real input from residents was the reason given by some people who did not attend the strategic planning meetings. Given the county's history with external and internal educational entities, it is not unreasonable to assume that there is a certain level of "learned helplessness" among many of the residents. Only half of those interviewed thought the strategic plan would make a difference in education in the county, and most interviewees who thought they had influence over what occurred in the school system were, in fact, school system employees.
- The geographic isolation of culturally different communities combined with forced consolidation to fan the flames of resentment and distrust in the county. These barriers to integration and improvement were not considered insurmountable, at least not by those who attended the planning meetings. Finding common ground can be the foremost task of a facilitator, and, to a great degree, this was accomplished among the participants, who gained a better understanding of their fellow Lincoln County residents. However, their understanding and desire to compromise to meet all groups' needs has not radiated out to all community members.
- It is too soon to tell whether the resentment residents feel about the consolidation issue will lessen, or how, in the long term, the consolidation issue will affect school-community relations. While consolidation is viewed as a negative outcome of the state takeover, there are those who are hopeful that a positive outcome of the state takeover will be an improved educational system, one that is worthy of the county's children.

There are pockets of strength in Lincoln County and in the school system. Capitalizing on these strengths will occur with the assistance of external providers, such as AEL staff, who can

guide the county around the emotional hot spots that tend to stymie real change efforts. Having a thorough understanding of the context becomes critical for an external technical assistance provider.

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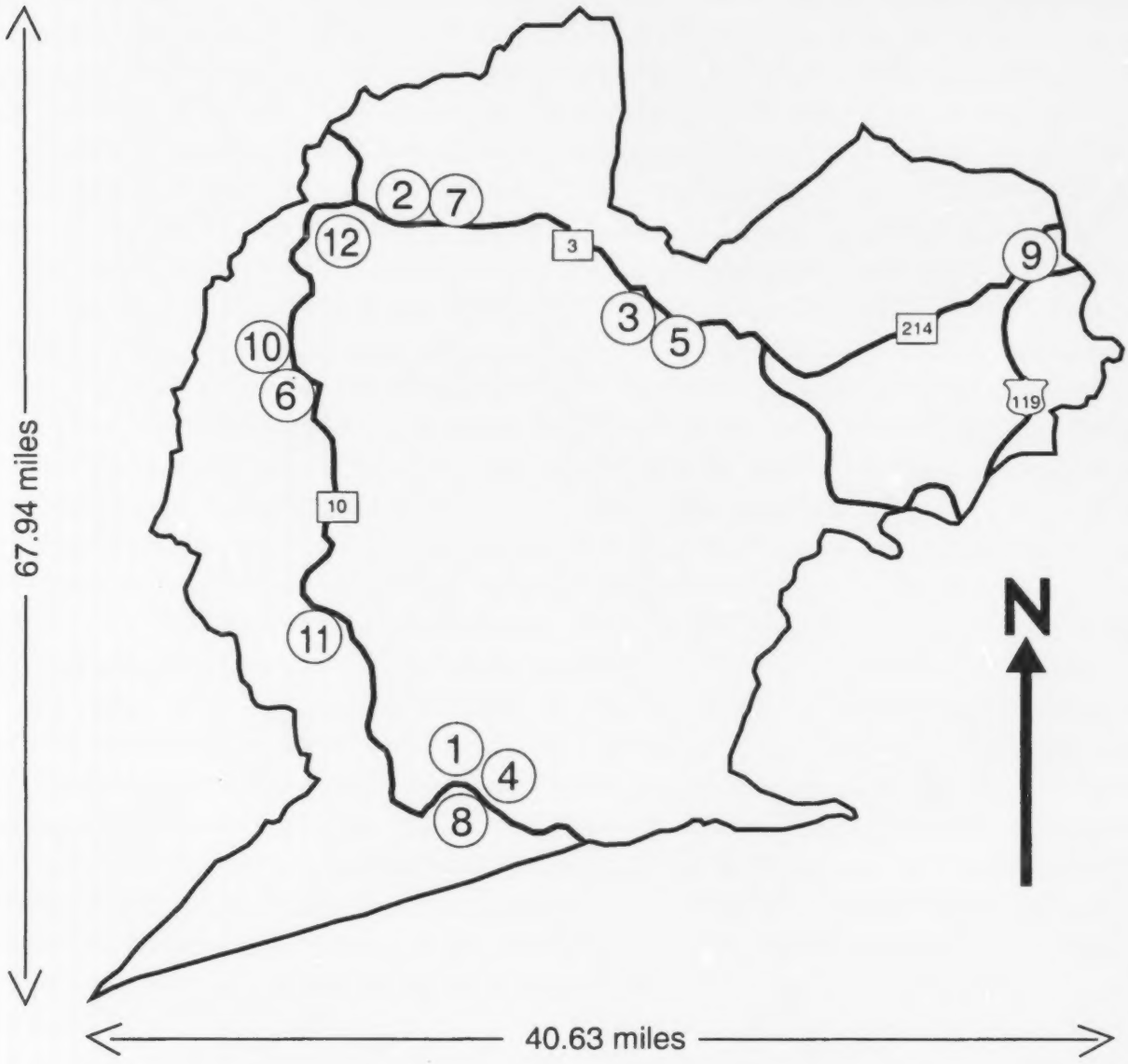
Appendixes

Appendix A

Map of Lincoln County



1.	Atenville Elementary School	Harts
2.	Charles Yeager Career Center	Hamlin
3.	Duval High School	Griffithsville
4.	Ferrellsburg Elementary School	Harts
5.	Griffithsville Elementary School	Griffithsville
6.	Guyan Valley High School	Branchland
7.	Hamlin School	Hamlin
8.	Harts High School	Harts
9.	Midway Elementary School	Alum Creek
10.	Pleasant View Headstart Center	Branchland
11.	Ranger Elementary School	Ranger
12.	West Hamlin Elementary School	West Hamlin

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Appendix B

Strategic Planning Participant Questionnaire

Lincoln County Schools Strategic Planning Questionnaire
AEL

AEL needs your help to improve our effectiveness. Please answer the following questions. They will help us conduct future sessions in Lincoln County more effectively and help us shape this process to meet the needs of other communities in our future work. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers are confidential and only the evaluator at AEL will have access to your responses.

	Please circle the one answer per question that best describes your opinion about the Strategic Planning Group ("the group").	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
1.	The group has a feeling of cohesiveness and team spirit.	5	4	3	2	1
2.	Everyone is involved in discussions, not just a few.	5	4	3	2	1
3.	The purpose of agenda items is kept in mind.	5	4	3	2	1
4.	The group is not efficient in getting things done.	5	4	3	2	1
5.	The group is tolerant of differences or disagreements.	5	4	3	2	1
6.	The group uses the abilities of all participants, not just a few.	5	4	3	2	1
7.	There has been too much talking and not enough decision making.	5	4	3	2	1
8.	The group listens to what I have to say.	5	4	3	2	1
9.	The facilitators try to make sure that everyone's opinions are heard.	5	4	3	2	1
10.	The facilitators keep the group on task.	5	4	3	2	1
11.	The facilitators seem to know how to develop strategic plans.	5	4	3	2	1
12.	The strategic plan will connect to what Lincoln County needs to become.	5	4	3	2	1
13.	I believe the plan we are developing will improve the quality of life for our young people.	5	4	3	2	1
14.	I am satisfied with the direction the planning group is going in.	5	4	3	2	1
15.	I believe that the plan we are developing will create a better school system in this county.	5	4	3	2	1
16.	The key decision makers in our community are involved in this strategic planning process.	5	4	3	2	1
17.	Anyone who wants to participate in the planning process is made to feel welcomed by the group.	5	4	3	2	1
18.	The people involved with the planning group seem deeply committed to its success.	5	4	3	2	1
19.	This group has the capability of producing a strategic plan that will benefit our schools.	5	4	3	2	1
20.	This group has the capability of producing a strategic plan that will benefit our community.	5	4	3	2	1

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21. Below are categories, or "community sectors," that may or may not represent your viewpoint.

(a) Please check all the community sectors that you feel describe the viewpoint you bring to the Strategic Planning Group, **AND**

(b) Then, put a second checkmark by the one community sector that you feel best describes your viewpoint:

____Parent of child under 18	____Teacher	____School or district administrative staff
____School board member	____Local business owner or representative	____Social service agency targeting youth / families
____Concerned citizen	____Faith community	____Health care
____Retired and/or elder care	____Other: _____	

22. Do you live in Lincoln County? ___No ___Yes If Yes, how many years have you lived here? _____

23. Do you work in Lincoln County? ___No ___Yes If Yes, how many years have you worked here? ____

24. What is your *main* reason for choosing to participate?

_____
_____
_____

25. Please complete the following sentence: "In my opinion, the greatest challenge that Lincoln County faces in creating and carrying out a strategic plan for education is…"

_____
_____
_____

26. What has AEL staff done well in terms of leading (facilitating) the strategic planning meetings?

_____
_____
_____

27. What could AEL staff have done better in leading (facilitating) these strategic planning meetings?

_____
_____
_____

Appendix C

Strategic Planning Telephone Interview

LINCOLN COUNTY STRATEGIC PLANNING INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hi, I'm _____ from AEL, an educational research and evaluation corporation in Charleston. AEL staff members have been facilitating the strategic planning process with Lincoln County's schools and citizens. I am one of the people responsible for evaluating the work AEL staff is doing with Lincoln County, and so, I'd like to ask you some questions relating to the strategic planning process. In order to gain a broad perspective on the process, it is essential that we interview people who chose not to participate in the strategic planning process as well as those who chose to participate.

There are no right or wrong answers and everything you say to me will be kept confidential, so please feel free to share your point of view. The evaluation team at AEL will have sole access to the answers you give, and your answers will be combined with others and shared only in a summarized report format. This is a short interview and should take 10 minutes of your time. Do you have any questions before I begin?

VERSION A: Nonattendees

Meetings

The process to create a strategic plan for Lincoln County has, up until this point, included an introductory meeting at each of the four high schools, five strategic planning group meetings, and several small work group meetings. Our records indicate that you attended one of the introductory meetings.

What was your reaction, or thoughts about, the strategic planning process as it was presented in the introductory meeting at the high school?

What were some of the reasons why you chose not to become involved in the strategic planning process?

To what extent do you believe that decision makers in the Lincoln County School System will refer to the strategic plan that is being created when setting new policy or programming?

- Who do you think the decision makers of the schools are?

- Do you think this plan will make a difference in education in the county?

Relationships

How much influence do you feel you have over what occurs in Lincoln County schools?

How unified do you feel Lincoln County is as one community? (Prompt for reasons for whatever answer respondent gives)

In general, how would you characterize the relationships between residents from the four Lincoln County high school attendance areas and the school system?

Probes:
The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the State Board of Education and the West Virginia Department of Education?

The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the local schools?

The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the county school board?

The relationship between residents and the school system central office administrators?

Do you have anything else that you would like to say about the strategic planning process?

We have concluded the interview. Thank you very much for your time.

VERSION B: Meeting Attendees

Meetings

The process to create a strategic plan for Lincoln County has, up until this point, included an introductory meeting at each of the four high schools, five strategic planning group meetings,

and several small work group meetings. You have attended most, if not all, of these meetings. I'm going to ask you about the strategic planning group meetings and small group meetings.

To what extent do you believe that the process used to run these meetings has been productive and efficient? If you attended any of the small work group meetings, did you find them to be more or less productive or efficient?

To what degree do you believe that all the major groups that have a stake in Lincoln County—in other words, the major constituencies of Lincoln County—have been represented at these strategic planning meetings?

- If not, what groups have been underrepresented?

- What are some of the reasons why you believe this group/these groups need to be better represented at a strategic planning process?

To what extent do you believe that decision makers in the Lincoln County School System will refer to the strategic plan that is being created when setting new policy or programming?

- Who do you think the decision makers of the schools are?

- Do you think this plan will make a difference in education in the county?

Relationships

How much influence do you feel you have over what occurs in Lincoln County schools? Do you believe the extent of your influence has changed as a result of participating in the strategic planning process?

How unified do you feel Lincoln County is as one community? (Prompt for reasons for whatever answer respondent gives)

Have relationships among people from the four Lincoln County high school communities changed as a result of this strategic planning process? If so, in what ways and upon what do you base your perception?

In general, how would you characterize the relationships between Lincoln County residents, especially parents, and the school system?

Probes:
The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the State Board of Education and the West Virginia Department of Education?

The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the local schools?

The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the county school board?

The relationship between residents, especially parents, and the school system central office administrators?

Have relationships between communities in Lincoln County and the Lincoln County School System changed at all as a result of this strategic planning process? If so, in what ways, and upon what do you base your perception?

Do you have anything else that you would like to say about the strategic planning process?

We have concluded the interview. Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix D

Program Evaluation Standards Checklist

Checklist for Applying the Standards

To interpret the information provided on this form, the reader needs to refer to the full text of the standards as they appear in Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, *The Program Evaluation Standards* (1994), Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

The Standards were consulted and used as indicated in the table below (check as appropriate):

Descriptor		The Standard was addressed	The Standard was partially addressed	The Standard was not addressed	The Standard was not applicable
U1	Stakeholder Identification	X			
U2	Evaluator Credibility	X			
U3	Information Scope and Selection	X			
U4	Values Identification	X			
U5	Report Clarity	X			
U6	Report Timeliness and Dissemination	X			
U7	Evaluation Impact	X			
F1	Practical Procedures	X			
F2	Political Viability	X			
F3	Cost Effectiveness	X			
P1	Service Orientation	X			
P2	Formal Agreements			X	
P3	Rights of Human Subjects	X			
P4	Human Interactions	X			
P5	Complete and Fair Assessment	X			
P6	Disclosure of Findings	X			
P7	Conflict of Interest	X			
P8	Fiscal Responsibility	X			
A1	Program Documentation	X			
A2	Context Analysis	X			
A3	Described Purposes and Procedures	X			
A4	Defensible Information Sources	X			
A5	Valid Information	X			
A6	Reliable Information	X			
A7	Systematic Information	X			
A8	Analysis of Quantitative Information	X			
A9	Analysis of Qualitative Information	X			
A10	Justified Conclusions	X			
A11	Impartial Reporting	X			
A12	Metaevaluation				

The Program Evaluation Standards (1994, Sage) guided the development of this (check one):

____ request for evaluation plan/design/proposal
____ evaluation plan/design/proposal
____ evaluation contract
_X_ evaluation report
____ other: _____

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